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THOMSON R. WEBBER.

A PIONEER OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY.

By J. O. Cunningham, of Urbana, Ill.

In the multiplicity of human affairs of this day, the personality of men, let them have been ever so prominent in their day and generation, when they are gone from life, or even from active life, they are soon lost sight of. This admitted fact well justifies the work of many of our friends, who, so kindly place upon the columns of the State Historical Society publications the names and careers of those "Forgotten Statesmen" who a generation or two since, made our laws and constitutions, executed the decrees of the Republic and its courts and kept for our information the records of government.

This fact will also, perhaps, justify the attempt of the writer of this article at recalling from the misty past a name which figured most conspicuously half a century since and before, in the eastern middle section of Illinois.

Thomson Rhodes Webber, one well entitled to the appellation above given to a class of men whom we can illy afford to forget, was born on October 6th, 1807, in Shelby county, Kentucky, and, as the name may indicate, was of German extraction.

In the year 1832, following the lead of quite a number of families from that part of his native state, he made his way, with his newly wedded wife, to that part of Vermilion county, Illinois, which a year later was by legislative enactment made the county of Champaign. Before then his father, William T. Webber, had entered large and valuable tracts of land in the neighborhood of the location of the present city of Urbana, upon which in a very primitive log cabin, the newly wedded couple made their home.

Mr. Webber had followed the calling of school teacher in his native state, and would have gladly renewed his engagements in his new home, but unfortunately, his new home was far from homes which could furnish the necessary youth to be taught. Squatter frontiersmen and Indians were his nearest neighbors and schools were yet to be thought of. The one thousand square miles of territory then soon to become Champaign county, contained less than one inhabitant to each of its square miles.

Occupation, however, for the new comer, was not long delayed, for the same year, the County Commissioners of Vermilion county appointed him a constable for that county, and the creation of the new county of Champaign the following year, with its paucity of available material for county officers, opened a wider field. Mr. Webber was appointed clerk of the County Commissioners, at the first meeting of the board and clerk of the Circuit Court of the county at the first term of the court, which offices he continued to hold, either by like appointments or by the choice of the people, for near a quarter of a century. He was the first postmaster of the new county seat, Urbana, and for more than forty years held and discharged the responsible office of Master in Chancery, by the appointments made by such early judges as Judge Samuel H. Treat and David Davis, followed by like actions of their successors.

Higher and more appreciative honors followed. In 1847, Mr. Webber was chosen from the district consisting of the counties of Champaign, Vermilion, Piatt and Coles, to represent the people in the Constitutional Convention which assembled in 1848 for the purpose of preparing and presenting the draft of a new constitution for the State. This duty was well and creditably performed and the work of that body made the fundamental law of the State for a period of twenty-three years. So, again, in 1861, Mr. Webber was chosen from a constituency consisting of the counties of Champaign, Piatt, De-

Witt and Macon, to represent again his fellow citizens in the Constitutional Convention of 1862. His work was again conscientiously performed, but the people, to whom it was referred, rejected the document as their constitutional law. This was during the war period and political feeling entered effectively into the contest.

Mr. Webber was from the first a loyal and steadfast Democrat, casting his first vote for Andrew Jackson. As such he was a supporter of Zadoc Casey, of Mt. Vernon, who represented the congressional district embracing Champaign county from 1833 to 1842, and likewise supported John Wentworth of Chicago, when Cook and Champaign counties, with the greater part of the northern half of the State, were embraced within the Third Congressional District. As a supporter of John Wentworth, Mr. Webber and other devoted democrats, repeatedly traveled across the unbroken and pathless country to Ottawa and other northern towns, to be in attendance upon congressional conventions called for the nomination of that gentleman as the democratic candidate. This errand was rarely performed within one week.

The long service of Mr. Webber in deliberative assemblies and the courts, with his advanced scholarship, so qualified him as a leader of men that few public meetings of the people of his county or district were held during his active life, that he was not made either the chairman or secretary of the same. He was easily the first citizen of his county for many years.

The exceptionally retentive memory of Mr. Webber as to passing events in the State and county of his residence made him a reliable authority in local history, and to this faculty and his willingness to relate the same to enquirers, is due the preservation in permanent form of many interesting events in the early settlement of his county.

Mr. Webber was connected with no organized church, but was a loyal believer in and supporter of Christianity,

to the precepts of which he adhered in all his dealings with his fellow men. His habits of punctuality and his formal manner of performing all duties of an official or personal character, marked him as what is generally known as a "gentleman of the old school," among his friends and associates.

After a residence in Champaign county of nearly fifty years, Mr. Webber died at his residence near Urbana, on December 14th, 1881, universally honored and regretted. One son, Hon. William B. Webber, who served the State in the 34th general assembly as a member of the House of Representatives, with many grand children, survive him at this time. The latter, W. B. Webber, has for nearly fifty years been a prominent and honored member of the bar of Champaign county.

The subject of this sketch had a state-wide acquaintance among the men of his day, especially with men of the legal profession who from time to time attended the terms of the circuit court of his county. During his service as clerk of that court its business was largely transacted by non-resident lawyers who followed the judges from county to county. Among these was Abraham Lincoln, who for many years rarely failed to attend all its sessions. Between the two there sprang up an appreciative friendship which was deep and lasting. So also with Judge David Davis, who for so many years presided in that court, and always held its clerk and his painstaking services as such in the highest esteem.

It will meet the demands of a comprehensive history of the earlier years of our State history, that the name of Thomson R. Webber be kept in memory.